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The Politics of Child Participation in International Development: The Dilemma of Agency

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This paper explores the politics of agency expressed through child participation in development. Empirically it focuses on Bangladesh, highlighting in particular the experience of one children's organisation. It asks how dynamics have changed over time, and what participation has meant for the children and their families. It raises three major challenges for current practice of child participation: the need to re-emphasise the priority of survival rights; the danger of 'projectisation', and the need to pay critical attention to the resources through which children's agency is built, and the very different models of development they reflect.

INTRODUCTION

Child Rights Week, September 2000, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, involved a number of large rallies. Street processions of children in slogan-bearing t-shirts and baseball caps culminated in mass meetings where government and civil society figures proclaimed their commitment to child rights, and a succession of children stood up to testify to their own experience of economic, sexual, and violent abuse. The stories were harrowing. But perhaps even more disturbing was the idea that these children, having lived through such experiences, should now be asked to recount these to order on stage, not once, it would seem, but as and when the occasion demanded it.

Such testimonies are one of the forms taken by 'children's voice' and 'child participation' in development. Another, just a few weeks later was the excited boast from a staff member of a child rights organisation,

that they had ‘taken children to the World Bank!’ The temerity of this, its reversal of the accepted order of things, was a matter of real pride. But like the children’s testimonies, it left an uneasy feeling. What did it mean? Why could such a statement stand in the case of children, when it was hard to imagine even in the heyday of gender and development, anyone making a parallel claim that they had ‘taken women to the World Bank?’

Another day, a children’s organisation had invited the children involved with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to discuss developing ways of working better together. Through various methods of dialogue and drama a long list of child rights issues was produced, including dowry, early marriage, the lack of birth registration, the violence of the police, and many more. Throughout the day the self-assertion of the children was mirrored by ritualised humility from the adults (NGO staff): ‘You understand your situation so much better than we do, we must learn from you, you are the important ones.’ The day was thus garlanded with claims to authenticity and the children’s distinctive autonomy. But the issues were the same as those previously identified by the NGOs, and they recur with great predictability as the outputs of such occasions, each of which is heralded as enabling a ‘new’ voice to be heard.

A striking feature that is common to all three incidents is a strong element of show, or theatricality. In some ways this is most marked in the first example, where the testimony of child survivors became a form of spectacle. This blurs the picture with respect to agency: who is authoring action, and on whose terms does it take place. Children who were posed as subjects in giving voice to their experiences simultaneously became objects of the gaze of others. The element of theatre was evident in the other incidents also. ‘Taking children to the World Bank’ offers a dramatic flourish, its power lying in the boldness of its symbolism of reversal. The children’s workshop similarly incorporated elements of show. Several of the children who led it had been involved in a project to produce a children’s television series, or had been trained as child journalists. Their style of interaction followed these models and so was very

different from ordinary speech. The statement ‘*Apni to shishu*’, in which one child appealed to another: ‘You (adult formal) are after all a child (infant in ordinary Bengali, but the term used in the NGO discourse for ‘child’ in ‘child rights’) offers a condensed example of this. Such hybridity, the mixing together of very different elements to form a potent new product, is evident in all three incidents. This makes it difficult to accept them at face value as the unmediated insertion of an authentic ‘child’s voice’ into the development arena. On the contrary, the timbre of the voice seems to change with the context in which it sounds.

Our intention in this paper is not to deny the need for children’s participation in development, or to downplay the value that it can have. For too many children in Bangladesh as elsewhere problems of abuse, exploitation and the denial of voice are all too real. Age is a fundamental axis of social power and it is right that the terms of this should be questioned and the abuses it sustains addressed. However, the introduction of ‘children’s participation’ within development programmes does not simply challenge existing forms of power, it also becomes itself a means through which power is expressed. It is these ‘new’ relations of power that the paper aims to explore.

This has both practical and theoretical dimensions. Practically, we ask what form participation has taken, and what it has meant for the children involved, their families and communities. Along with a more general review of some of the experience in Bangladesh, we consider the story of one children’s organisation, ‘*Amra*’ (*We*)², and how dynamics within it have changed over time. This leads us to question much of the current practice of participation, suggesting that it can be both concentrating and exclusive, at once *associating* a very small number of chosen children to the development industry, and *dissociating* them from the majority they are claimed to represent. Theoretically we concentrate on the issue of agency, which is a central theme within both the advocacy of participation and the enterprise of development. We ask what forms of agency are being promoted and whose interests they serve. We

consider what these reveal of the political economy of development, and the underlying structures through which it is governed.

The outline of the paper is as follows. We begin with a brief introduction to the place of ‘child participation’ within international development: its location within child rights on the one hand, and broader approaches to participation in development on the other. We then discuss some sociological starting points regarding childhood and dilemmas of agency. The main part of the paper is the presentation of the Bangladesh case study. We then interrogate these findings using the theoretical perspectives introduced earlier. In conclusion we suggest an alternative approach to child participation, which would bring a very different trajectory.

The story of this paper is one in which we have both taken part to a greater or lesser extent. At its heart lie the reflections of Shyamol Choudhury on his work with disadvantaged children over the past fifteen years, initially in Dhaka and more recently in the South Asia region more broadly. Most significant within this is his time as facilitator of *Amra* from 1995-2001. Much of the argument here is pre-figured in his MSc dissertation on children’s participation (Choudhury 2003).³ Sarah White entered the story in 2000, when she conducted a Dhaka based study of street and working children.⁴ In the course of this she undertook a detailed study of *Amra*. Finally, the paper draws on a joint follow up study in 2004-5, looking at how *Amra* had developed, the style of participation followed and the implications of this.⁵ The fieldwork was undertaken by Shyamol, involving intensive group and individual interviews, consultation, and field visits with different categories of members, ⁶ making up over 100 children in all. It also involved interviews with some of their parents, and staff in the international agency that sponsored *Amra* and some other Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs). Shyamol was well known to all the respondents. We believe that this prior relationship gave the interviews a foundation of trust that allowed the children to speak openly

and with confidence. It does mean, however, that we write here very much as people implicated in what we are describing.

CHILD PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT

The ultimate reference points for discussions of child participation are Articles 12-15 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 12 states that a child should be able to speak on matters that affect him or herself, including in legal or administrative proceedings. Articles 13-15 confer on children rights to freedom of expression; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and freedom of association. Even within these Articles, however, the CRC is somewhat equivocal on the issue of children's agency. Article 12 restricts the right to speak to a child who is 'capable of forming his or her own views' with the clear implication is that it is adults who will determine children's levels of capability. Article 14 recognises the 'rights and duties' of parents and/or legal guardians 'to provide direction' to the child in how she or he exercises the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Such cautions are in line with references elsewhere in the CRC to children's 'developing capabilities' or 'maturity' which suggest a more general ambivalence regarding children's competence to determine their own fates. Lewis (1998) points out that this ambiguity is at the heart of the legal principle which the CRC endorses, that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions and institutions concerning children. This at once confers rights on children as if they were competent legal subjects, and simultaneously undermines this competence, by providing for these rights to be exercised on their behalf by others. Some child rights organisations express these ambiguities regarding responsibility and so agency by devising specific terms. For Save the Children Sweden, for example, Theis (2004) distinguishes the 'rights-holders' (children), from the 'care-givers' (their families), and the 'duty-bearers' (the state), maintaining that all must be involved if child rights are to be achieved.

Such ambiguities notwithstanding, the development of thinking on child rights since the CRC has seen increasing importance given to child participation. In 2003 alone, child participation was the theme of the influential UNICEF report on ‘the State of the World’s Children’; a global meeting of the Save the Children Alliance; and a Plan International hosted seminar for the UK development community (Hart et al 2004:9). As in other human rights approaches to development, participation is regarded not only as a right in itself, but as ‘a prerequisite to making all other claims.’ (Ferguson 1999:9). Increased openness to children’s participation is thus seen as a good in itself, with participation expected both to enhance the confidence and influence of the children concerned, and to lead to an institutional and community environment which is more child rights friendly overall (Hart et al. 2004; Kirby et al. 2004).

In international development the agenda for children’s participation draws together a number of broader trends which we can only point to very briefly here. Most obviously, there is the promotion of ‘rights based approaches’ which have to some extent at least replaced an earlier orientation towards the welfare or needs of disadvantaged groups (Eyben 2003). The language of rights is now virtually mandatory for any Bangladeshi agencies that wish to attract outside funding for their work with children (White 2002a). The rights agenda entailed a shift from the earlier orientation of working *for* children to work *with* or even *by* children. Echoing the already well established lobby for participation in development, this in turn means a move from a primary preoccupation with outcomes (‘development effectiveness’) to giving attention also to processes – how outcomes are achieved – and (at its best) the power relations involved (see eg Selznick 1949/66; Burkey 1993; Cornwall 2000; Guijt and Shah 1998; Cooke and Kothari 2001).

A key theme in the participation agenda has always been the fact that means and ends, process and outcome are inextricably linked. The child rights community has taken up this importance of process, identifying ‘child rights principles’ which can be used to strengthen implementation of formal

commitments (UNICEF 2001:95). While these principles are not spelt out precisely, two aspects are prominent. The first is the centrality of participation: that children should themselves be at the centre of development activities, no longer the passive targets of the good intentions of others. The second is to 'mainstream' children and child rights issues, bringing them from the margins to the centre of development activities and thinking. This marks a shift away from a focus on special children's programmes or concentration on specific sectors such as health and education. Instead, the challenge is to consider how children are affected by the whole range of development policies and trends and to develop a child-focused agenda in relation to these: from good governance to international trade to national budgeting. This has two rather different outcomes. On the one hand, the focus on children can be used to intensify claims for attention to the human side of development, such as the urgency of social welfare programmes to mitigate the suffering caused by economic adjustment programmes (Marcus 2004). On the other hand, the agenda of 'mainstreaming' child rights, has also meant the scope of child rights programmes has become ever more ambitious. The UNICEF Annual Report on participation, for example, expressed the need to 'deepen democracy' in the context of growing 'international terrorism', and that democracy begins with children (UNICEF, 2003:11). What this really means, and how one reads it in the context of the highly partisan ways that notions of democracy are deployed in geopolitical discourse, is open to question. It is, however, reflected in a range of programmes aimed at promoting children's citizenship and political participation.

PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A preoccupation with participation is not of course limited to the child rights community, but is evident across international development as a whole. Paradoxically, however, these conversations often go on in parallel, rather than being shared. The breadth of current work on participation in development means that

it is impossible to discuss it adequately here. Rather than confirm this tendency for parallel conversations, however, we suggest briefly how the current discussion of child participation might connect to broader development debates.

Development's delight in novelty and the discovery of 'alternatives' conspire to pose participation as something new, but in fact it is a long-standing issue. Hickey and Mohan (2004) trace it back to 1940s/1950s colonial development, and through several incarnations since then. For most commentators, however, it is since the late 1980s that claims for 'participatory' development have gathered force. There is now a small industry around the promotion of participatory methods, and reflection on their use.⁷ Debates circle around the quality and ethics of participatory practice (eg Cornwall and Pratt 2002); the extent to which minority voices are heard and the danger of presenting a falsely homogenous view of 'the community' (Guijt and Shah 1998); the manipulation of outcomes by facilitators or particularly powerful participants; and the (lack of) systems of accountability between participants and those they are taken to represent (White and Pettit 2007). Arguments for greater participation are made on technical grounds, to guard against the wastefulness of inappropriate technologies and programmes, or bring the financial gains of cost-sharing with local communities (Burkey 1993). Politically, participation is advocated as a means of empowerment of the disadvantaged through enhanced voice, access and control. More darkly, it is also critiqued as a means to contain or co-opt potential popular resistance (Selznick 1966; Cooke and Kothari, eds. 2001). In practice the character of participation as 'political' or 'technical'; 'means' or 'ends'; nominal' or 'transformatory'; the interests it serves and trajectories it enables; is highly contested, and – as participation itself is of necessity a process – fundamentally unstable and open to change (White 1996).

Seeking to move beyond a full-frontal assault on participation as ‘tyranny’ (Cooke and Kothari, ed. 2001) Hickey and Mohan (ed. 2004) admit the need for participatory approaches to deepen their understandings of power, go beyond individualism and engage better with structural analysis and issues of politics and governance. This is to be welcomed, and has clear resonance with what is argued in this paper. What is critical, however, is that the focus on ‘politics’ does not concern only the societies undergoing development, but also the micro and macro politics of the development industry itself. At a micro level, studies of bureaucracies show how institutional interests, internal conflicts and personal circumstances may undermine formal objectives (eg Robertson 1984; Goetz ed. 1997). At a macro level, Hart et al (2004:11-12) for example, point out that the political agenda behind child participation lies in promoting liberal democracy, and preparing children to play their part as active citizens in existing structures, rather than in seeking more radical alternatives. Whether or not this is stated explicitly or even recognised, this will constrain the kind of participation that agencies are ready to promote. In his ethnography of development planning in Malaysia, Robertson (1984) identifies ‘ideology,’ ‘a symbolic relationship between the state [or agency] and the people’, as a central element within planned development.⁸ For Clifford Geertz (1964:55)

‘ideology names the structure of situations in such a way that the attitude towards them is one of commitment.’

This symbolisation of relationship is the main function of ‘participation,’ whether in child-focused or main-frame development, and the task of analysis is to explore the politics this sustains.

ANALYSING AGENCY

The impact of the CRC was not limited to policy circles, it also enabled the ‘discovery’ of children as sociological and anthropological subjects in their own right. The issue of agency was key to this. The new approaches moved from seeing children as the objects of others’ actions, to viewing them as subjects or agents in their own right. In place of the earlier understanding of children as of interest primarily for what they would *become*, this literature stresses the present *being* of children. Instead of seeing them as *deficient or vulnerable*, as not yet able to exercise the abilities that adults have, this literature stresses their abilities and *competence*. Instead of being in receipt of charity or compassion, they are the holders of rights which must be respected (see eg James et al 1998; Mayall 2002; James and Prout ed 1990; Prout 2005).

To do a comprehensive review of the sociological literature on agency is clearly beyond our capacity in this paper. What we wish to do instead is to focus on two challenging perspectives, both of which have been developed in the context of studying children. The first of these is Nick Lee’s (2001) discussion of the assemblage/actor network approach. The second is Harriet Strandell’s (2002) reflections on her fieldwork in day-care centres for 3-6 year olds.

In an earlier paper (White 2002b:1097) we suggested that the debate between adult/child and being/becoming was in danger of setting up a false dichotomy. The need, instead was:

‘to explore how both adults and children are at once 'being' and 'becoming', negotiating their present in relation at once to their past [and future] selves and in response to encounter with others.’

Nick Lee (2001:2) adopts a slightly different, but quite compatible approach. He maintains that:

‘there are no “human beings” but ...there are instead potentially unlimited ways of “becoming human.”

Lee links this to economic structures, in which Fordist ‘jobs for life’ have been replaced by greater flexibility in patterns of work and personal relationship. More theoretically, he also bases this view on his reading of Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari and Latour, who all reject the idea that the capacity for agency is a property of sovereign (adult) (male?) individuals.⁹ For Deleuze and Guattari, persons are composite assemblages which are constantly ‘borrowing’ from others and from their environments. Thus the conjunction of a human-horse, or a human-tool enables humans to become riders or craftspeople, giving a whole range of new potentials (Lee 2001:114). Latour draws attention to the paradox that as agency increases, so does dependence on ‘extensions’ – other people, technologies etc – to express it. He gives the example of Pasteur, whose reputation as the independent author of pasteurisation depends critically on the ‘network’ of machinery, political backing, employees etc who implemented and spread his ideas (Lee 2001:129-130).

Such perspectives raise a whole range of interesting issues. For the purposes of this paper, however, the critical aspect of Lee’s discussion is the way it opens up a distinctive direction for empirical analysis. As Lee (2001:131) says, once we see agency as deriving from the relations between people and their environment:

‘We can ask what a given person, whether adult or child, depends upon for their agency.
So... instead of asking whether children, like adults, possess agency or not, *we can ask how*

agency is built or may be built for them by examining the extensions and supplements that are available to them' (emphasis added).

For the study of child participation in development, this means moving away from the fetish of seeking the 'pure', 'true' or unmediated 'voice of the child'. Instead, it means looking at what kinds of resources children draw on in expressing agency, and how these shape their participation in different ways. 'Resources' here are not limited to material assets, but include also human, social and cultural dimensions.¹⁰

Derived from a very different starting point, Harriet Strandell (2002) directs us similarly away from actors or individuals and onto the action or context. Her paper reflects on the reception given to her research, and particularly how professionals wanted to frame it and the children's activities it described. For ethnographers of children, she maintains, critical questions arise of the relation to adult workers and their categories and 'knowledge', the 'conceptual governing of the field'¹¹ (23).

'The [ethnographic] "field" is not just that of the separate children's world; it also encompasses the adult professional world of work, which is strongly framed.'

(*ibid*: 22)

This 'framing' has at least two levels. In the first place, it labels forms of behaviour in particular ways - in the case of the day-care centres Strandell observed, categorising the children's apparently random shifts between activities as 'play.' Secondly, it also regulates what can be said by the researcher about what is taking place. The professionals reserve the right to define the terms, and to reject the researcher's interpretation of what is going on if it does not coincide with their own. Both of these levels are clearly evident in representations of child participation. Development agency

staff commonly claim the right to determine both what counts as ‘participation’ (and what kinds of participation count) and how it is represented. As a result, while there are many studies praising the potential of children’s participation, and advising how to ‘do it better’, there are relatively few that discuss in any depth its complexity and the contradictions of power it can involve.

PRACTISING CHILD PARTICIPATION IN BANGLADESH

Some of the flavour of child participation as practised amongst development organisations in Bangladesh has already been given in the introduction. It is no coincidence that all of these involved meetings of different kinds. In practice, if you ask what children are participating *in*, the answer in the vast majority of cases will be meetings. Within these, participation may of course take many forms, which we summarise as presentation, consultation and advocacy.

Children’s testimonies are an obvious, high intensity form of presentation. At the opposite end of the spectrum, ‘children’s participation’ may constitute singing or dancing, a ‘cultural programme’ designed to welcome an honoured guest or enliven a seminar or workshop in which the serious business of discussion is left to the adults. More seriously, children are increasingly involved in devising and acting out forms of drama, which seek to raise consciousness of important issues in the manner of street theatre – though rarely on the street.

Consultation is perhaps the dominant form of children’s participation. Initially mainly of the ‘tell us your problems’ style, it has now become institutionalised in some NGOs, with children being consulted at key points in the project cycle, or through a regular programme of meetings, or incorporated on NGO

management committees. The most high profile examples in Bangladesh are the consultations leading up to the UN Special Assembly (UNGASS) in 2002 and the subsequent National Plan of Action. This clearly merges into advocacy, which takes place at the highest level, including meeting with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and talking to the foreign minister about the budget. Consultation/advocacy also takes place globally, with children flying to international conferences or visiting the home country of the donor agency that sponsors their organisation. Some children have used exposure to these kinds of opportunities to develop skills which they can then employ at home. A small number of the *Amra* children have become proficient facilitators, and have been invited to conduct advocacy with other organisations in Dhaka.

Media is an area where there has been quite a lot of interest. The children's television programme project was mentioned earlier. A number of children have become child reporters, and an NGO has established a children's media house, which publishes its own magazine. In the early years a prominent photographer issued some children with cameras for a project showing a 'child's eye view.' These were made into a documentary which was shown in the USA and some of the photographs were also exhibited in a prestigious part of Dhaka. More recently, an exhibition of children's photographs has also been shown in one of the parks in central Dhaka. Children have also participated in longer term consultations which have been used as the basis for NGO publications and videos on child rights issues. Participation also takes the form of children's research. *Amra* has been subcontracted by several organisations to undertake surveys of the needs of children in slums, including an assessment of flood damage. Children's clubs are another increasingly common form of participation. These are youth clubs usually on NGO premises, which may form the basis of children's incorporation within the project management cycle.

As the paragraphs above suggest, the scope and form of children's participation is quite diverse. A number of common characteristics are however immediately evident. The elements of show and

hybridity, noted above, are common across the range. While children and young people have long been active members of social welfare associations, clubs, sporting clubs, and libraries (Choudhury 2003) the style of these is rather different from the new clubs in NGO offices. This is particularly evident with regards to norms around sexuality, as many of the children's participation activities allow much freer mixing between adolescents than is generally accepted within Bangladesh where interaction between unmarried young men and women is often strictly controlled.¹²

While visibility is high, the real extent of participation is often quite limited. Much of the participation is tokenistic, and where it is more in-depth it relies on the circulation of a small group of the 'same faces'. These few tend to have little or no accountability to a broader constituency. An evaluation done on one of the few instances where large numbers (in the tens of thousands) of children are claimed to be involved found the numbers evaporated on closer inspection. Group closure – in which the original participants close ranks to shut others out – is a real danger, and often seems to take place almost at once. The UNGASS consultations on 'A world fit for children' illustrate this well. An adult present describes how it was:

'There was a lot of excitement at the first meeting in February 2001. Forty children were present, and they all recognised the need to bring others in. The children were full of ideas how to do this – that they would spread the word through schools, neighbours and so on. They were so enthusiastic that the adults felt the children were in danger of taking on too much – they needed to scale things down. So it was agreed that each child at the meeting should consult twenty other children before the meeting the next month. At the meeting the next month no-one had talked to any other children, but they all wanted to continue meeting. So the meetings became institutionalised with just these forty children, and the vision for participation narrowed.'

There is a bias towards attractive, articulate, middle class participants, with a tendency to reproduce the patterns of exclusion in wider society – by age, class, gender, and (dis)ability. The class-neutral category of ‘children’ lends itself to co-option, even where an initiative starts out as pro-poor. ‘*Mukto Khobor* (Free News), the children’s television programme, is an example of this. Funded by a child rights agency to give poor children a voice, the programme makers from the start insisted on including also middle class children ‘for balance.’ When the final selection of presenters was made, none of the most marginalised was included: the quota for the poorest children was filled by the lower middle class or better placed amongst the poor. This was not simply an adult imposition: it was also justified by the middle class children themselves on the grounds that they were better able to speak. The resulting programmes accordingly aimed at providing entertainment and appealing to the ‘general audience,’ vitiating the initial vision of a poverty focus.

This take over by middle class children is of course part of a broader tendency in Bangladesh as elsewhere, for the middle class to feel that they can comprehend the ‘minority interest.’¹³ A staff member of another NGO described how this came out in their discussions with mixed class groups of children of a video they had made about (poor) children in the justice system.

‘We had a question at the end, where should we go with this? The middle class kids were quite clear, we need to talk to the government. So we asked them, but don’t you need some more preparation before you can do this? They said, no, we can go, we can talk to them. So we asked again, but what about these other children, do you think you really understand what they have gone through, don’t you think you need to spend more time with them to be

sure that you can really represent them? They were really confused by the question, and the suggestion that they might not always be the appropriate ones to speak.’

In general, as noted above, the ‘children’s’ agenda seems to follow closely that already identified by the NGOs. This echoes the pattern noted by Cook (2004:15):

‘Children’s “voices” (at least those that can be “heard” in and by larger power structures) are always already mediated through adults and organisations.’

Issues that are off that agenda rarely arise and when they do, there may be resistance. An example of this is when an NGO held a participatory exercise in the slums, and the children stated water provision as a priority need. The NGO staff questioned this. Violence, sexual abuse, drugs, yes – but water?! Maybe the children had been influenced by someone, or maybe it was a need at that particular moment so they had given it an exaggerated priority. But then a focus group came up with the same finding. Pursuing it, the NGO found that the water source the children were having to use at present was across the railway track which ran through the slum where they lived. They faced a lot of difficulty going there, and there were many injuries to children working or playing near the tracks.

Other issues do not arise at all, but lives go on in parallel. Thus sexuality only appears in child rights discourse in the form of adult predation, with child marriage as a form of ‘sexual abuse.’ At the same time, romantic and sexual relationships arise in the midst of child rights advocacy – and it is far from unknown for ‘child activists’ to elope and get married.

Where a distinctive ‘child’s voice’ is heard, it often carries a distinctly middle class lilt. Thus in the consultations concerning education for the National Plan of Action, the children’s demands included play areas and materials; private tuition funded by government; and a cultural programme or cultural lessons one day a week. The prevalence of class co-option has led some to question whether participation is in fact the agenda of the poor. Is it, as claimed, the foundation on which all other rights must be built, or does it, instead shut out other more fundamental survival rights issues and cause further exclusion of the poor (Choudhury 2003)?

AMRA

The experience of *Amra* offers a somewhat different perspective on the impact of child participation. Established in 1995, the basis of *Amra* was a small group of friends, boys aged 7-12 years who roamed the streets with sacks looking for rubbish which they could sell on.¹⁴ Supported by an adult facilitator, they decided to join together to work to improve their own lives and the lives of other children like them. Before the language of ‘child participation’, *Amra* was unique in being an organisation *of* street and working children *for* street and working children. At its heart was the group process, in which the boys would reason and argue together, devise their work programme, share and discuss their problems, and thrash out any conflicts that arose. Through this group process they determined their own rules and principles: that only working children could be core members; that the organisation belonged to the children who ran it, referring to adults only when they could not manage something themselves; that the group needed to look after each individual within it; that strength and fun lay in being together, so work should be done and decisions made collectively; that everyone should be treated fairly and equally, with no-one dominating the others; that there should be no fighting, beating or bullying; that everyone needed to do what they said they would; that needs should be met as simply as possible, so that there was a

minimum of difference between *Amra* children and those they sought to serve; that members should avoid addictive habits and known hazards; that they should look outwards to make links with others who could help them in their work.

Amra was always very small – in 2000 it had a core group of 8-10 boys, working with around 70 children in street level groups, and supported by around 30 others, including boys who had formerly been active members, and still wanted to support the organisation despite having grown up. It was also beset with problems: hostility and attempts at capture in the communities; non-co-operation from other agencies; the tension between action and advocacy; the need for the children to make money; family and personal problems. Despite all this, it marked out a distinctive presence within the NGO community, and a challenge to more conventional development approaches.

Even before 2000 the potential of *Amra* had become clear to some other organisations, who were keen to involve the boys in their slum-based research programmes and invite them to their meetings. These demands built up as the stress on child participation grew and child rights NGOs felt increasing pressure to ‘produce’ children’s participation particularly in their advocacy activities, to demonstrate their own internal and external legitimacy. The implications of this for *Amra* were quite contradictory. On the one hand it gave the core group powerful opportunities to express their views and concerns. On the other hand it drew their attention increasingly away from what had been their primary work: being on the streets supporting other very poor children. The visibility of advocacy/media occasions, the big names they attract, the exposure they offer, the food and expenses they provide, were all quite seductive. Added to the fact that such events have specific times and deadlines, these factors combined to make attendance at such events a priority, rather than maintaining the difficult, uncomfortable, low profile work with the street-based groups. As the evaluation study undertaken in 2000 warned, this held the danger that *Amra*

would wake up one day to find its core reference points had shifted, with its main work servicing other organisations, and its primary client group no longer poor children, but international agencies.

Getting the balance right between direct work with slum children and involvement in higher profile advocacy activities has been an ongoing struggle. The balance has been struck differently at different times, but overall the weight has shifted considerably away from the slum literacy programme. A major factor in this has been the change in adults responsible for supporting *Amra*. The original facilitator withdrew in 2001. The person who took over from him had a background in acting and the performance arts. *Amra* had always done some drama as part of their literacy and awareness raising work, following in a long established tradition of ‘street’ theatre in Bangladesh. The new staff member encouraged *Amra* to make this a much more prominent part of their work, under the banner of ‘theatre for development.’ Their performance is impressive, and two or three of the boys have gained subsequent work in films. But there is a keen irony, that acting out the problems of poor children for middle class audiences has displaced practical actions to address them. As one of the children put it:

‘We performed in Shaheed Minar¹⁵ with a plot taken from real life in our area. But the real characters did not go with us.’

One could argue, of course, that for *Amra* this shift in primary orientation from action to advocacy was a rational move, that the marginal difference which the voice of organised poor children could make within the policy community is much greater than the practical difference that the same children could make in terms of spreading literacy and awareness in the slums. There is no doubt some truth to this, all action with no advocacy would mean tremendous missed opportunities. The treacherous aspect, however, is the way that the dynamic towards this model of children’s participation itself dissociates the participants from

the children they supposedly represent. The essential qualities of *Amra*, its rootedness in the collective identity of the group process and its daily active relationships with other poor children in the wider community were put in jeopardy through their incorporation as ‘child participants.’ Ultimately, this could also threaten the contribution to advocacy, as *Amra*’s members’ ability to articulate the interests of marginalised children in a distinctive way is grounded in their day by day experience of working in the slums.

A staff member of an international child rights NGO described this process of dissociation in relation to a participatory study they had done, leading to a video, also with very disadvantaged children:

‘What is really important is that we don’t just create another NGO!..... We saw how easily it happens... Even with those kids, when we came to wanting to invite other kids to watch the video and discuss it, they were hesitant to get kids straight from the street. They wanted to get kids who are involved with the other NGOs. Because they felt that we are no longer precisely like those kids, we are a bit different. And it is difficult to get kids straight from the street, whether they will come and all that.’

The more recent experience of *Amra* shows how this dissociation has occurred at many levels with the inflation of participation opportunities. The first chance for an *Amra* member to travel abroad (to Delhi) was in December 2000. For practical reasons it happened that he was one of the better off *Amra* members – since this meant he could get a passport in time. He was praised by everyone and pressed to come to the follow up meeting to be held in Kathmandu the following year. Guided by the principles noted above, he responded that next time it would be someone else’s turn to come - any of the *Amra* members would speak in the same way as he. Since then there have been many more international visits – including several to

Europe. Wherever they have gone the *Amra* children have been celebrated and appreciated. Their personal experience of poverty and their training in group formation enable them to speak clearly and with authority. But the earlier strong collective values have broken down. When their funding agency suggested a few years later that someone other than the two or three main activists should be the one to visit Europe this time, they had a major fight on their hands.

For the agencies who promote international conferences, the travel is incidental. The point is to be able to display a 'global community' of children, coming together to discuss matters of common concern. Within Bangladesh, by contrast, travel abroad, particularly to the West, is of tremendous symbolic value, as well as being seen as an avenue of material enrichment (see eg Gardner 1995). Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, references to these visits abroad occurred repeatedly in the 2004 interviews with *Amra* members and their families. For all outside of the central few who had participated in them and their families, they were a focus of considerable tension and resentment.

There are similar issues on a much smaller scale with regard to the travel expenses that *Amra* members receive for participating in meetings or travelling to the office or to school. While the funding agency that supplies these see them as a means to an end, in discussion with *Amra* members and former members they appear more as of value in themselves. As time has gone on, not only has the rate of payment risen, but also receiving it has become institutionalised as an entitlement – whether the money is spent on travelling or not.¹⁶ Again, this is a focus of considerable resentment which reveals serious fault-lines between children and young people in different parts of the organisation.

As the collectivist orientation has given over to a more individualist one, so differences of power amongst the children have become more marked. There is alienation of the core from the wider group. Smaller and

slum children no longer feel free to come to the *Amra* office, nor to speak in meetings. If they do try, they risk taunting or humiliation. *Amra*, they say, has become a '*Borolok*' (rich people's) organisation.

Relations between the activists and their families have similarly changed. The picture is complex. On the one hand, the families value the stipend that their children earn through their work with *Amra*. They are pleased at the new opportunities that their sons have had and generally approve of what they are doing. Neighbours similarly have a good opinion of the boys. The parents also expressed happiness that the boys are no longer mixing with 'bad people.' This suggests a clash between a development orientation and the class/status aspirations and divisions amongst the poor. The slum children targeted by the literacy programme might well qualify as just such 'bad people.' The parents also look to the agency that funds *Amra* to find their sons jobs: 'You are like their guardians now.'

This statement may be read in several ways. Taken at face value, it casts the agency as good (quasi-kin) patron, and represents an assertion by the parents of the organisation's ongoing duty of care towards their sons. But it could also be understood as an ironic expression of the displacement that some parents feel. In Bangladesh, the word 'guardian' is commonly used for parent, especially father. In meetings with the funding agency the parents profess themselves happy. Privately, one of the mothers expressed more mixed feelings. She stays quiet in meetings, she said, because her son has threatened that if she complains about his behaviour, the agency will stop his stipend.¹⁷ She is also afraid herself that this might happen. But she is in fact upset by her son's lack of respect at home: that he is never there, is rude about the food, doesn't help out at home, is not going to school, is disobedient, and thinks he is better than they are. The comments of a teacher at the school *Amra* members are supposed to attend echo these sentiments. The *Amra* members, he said, are irregular in attendance, more interested in meetings than studies, and 'feel that they are not like other children' so different rules should apply to them than to others.

Families and teachers have problems with adolescents the world over, and these comments clearly need to be read with this in mind. Putting all of these fragments together, however, it would seem that incorporation in the participation agenda has had a major impact on the culture of *Amra* and relations involving the children and young people within it. For two or three individuals the experience of participation has been an empowering one. Their horizons have expanded dramatically, their whole body language expresses a very different way of being in the world. They have in many ways attained a kind of celebrity status. An obvious question is whether this can be sustained once their special status as ‘child activists’ has run its course, and whether they can adapt back into their home contexts, or use what they have learnt successfully to launch themselves in new adult careers. There was also a dark reference by one of the international agency staff about ‘over-empowered children’, suggesting that even those who have helped give shape to the way *Amra* has developed since 2002 are not wholly at ease with its outcomes.

For the general picture, it is clear that the collectivist orientation and solidarity within the organization has shifted to a much more individualist approach. Power differentials have deepened and become more entrenched. Comments from both the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ are predominantly commodity and consumption focused. The dynamic of this model of participation is both concentrating and exclusive: the celebrity few are by the act of participation progressively dissociated from the constituency for which they speak.

BUILDING CHILDREN’S AGENCY

Having looked at the situation in Bangladesh, we return to the theoretical questions posed by Lee and Strandell, in order to analyse the agency that is expressed. Following Lee, this means looking at ‘how

agency is built or may be built for [children]’. Following Strandell, it means turning our attention to the ‘field’ in which the agency takes place. This is where we start this section.

The story of *Amra* shows a shift in the ‘field’ of participation, from the slums to the development agencies. This shows most simply in the location of activities. It also shows in the orientation of the organisation and the kinds of issues which became its focus. The change happened gradually, but two broad phases can be identified. From 1995 to 2001, the focus of *Amra* was organising children, building up the capacities of and solidarity amongst core members, and seeking to use these in working with other slum children. It was a difficult process, fraught with frustration, in which every two steps forward were accompanied by at least one step back. Issues around membership and the need for regular attendance to build up strong organisation from the start conflicted with the insecurity and unpredictability of street working children’s lives. Linked closely to this was an ongoing tension between the time required to achieve a genuinely participatory process and members’ need to earn income to support themselves. Like many established NGOs in Bangladesh, *Amra* found to its cost how difficult it is to make money through a legitimate business when the market is full of adulterated goods and gangsters of various sorts – including the police – demanding a cut of profits. Achieving a fair balance between individual and collective interests was also an ongoing issue. There were recurring problems around the need to gain and control access to office space. This was one aspect of the challenge of managing relations with a wider community riven with crime, violence and factionalism. There were also repeated disappointments in links with other agencies, despite the fact that some offered vital forms of support.

The ‘field’ of child participation in Bangladesh is constituted by the development agencies. In a literal, physical sense children typically come *out* of their homes, schools, workplaces or neighbourhoods and *into* the NGO offices. Discursively also the ‘rules of the game’ – what is discussed, and the mode of discussion – belong to the development world, not to the children’s home of origin. Evoking Bourdieu’s

(1977) notion of ‘habitus’, a set of dispositions or way of being in the world, this goes beyond words into the management of time, space, and bodies. As child participation has become institutionalised so it has built up its own set of conventions and practices. This includes both the systematised techniques for making events child friendly (Johnson 1998; O’Kane 2000) and more informal culture and norms. These latter become visible when transposed from one context to another. The bodily flourish of a child suddenly throwing back his head to show he’s had enough of discussion and there should now be some kid’s ‘time-out’ might ‘work’ in the international conference where it is learned, but may jar when transferred back into the work-a-day world of his own sponsoring agency.

In part at least the centrality of the development agencies reflects the real difficulty of working outside in ‘the world’. The early experience of *Amra* gives ample demonstration of this. Setting up parallel structures rather than working with those that already exist has always been a core temptation to development agencies, whether they are international donors wanting to have their own self-sufficient projects or the ‘rent-a-district’ style intensive area development programmes of the 1960s and 70s (Farmer 1984). To convince themselves and others that development is achievable through the administrative means that they have at their disposal, agencies have to simplify, bypass or deny the complexities and politics involved (Hirschman 1967, Ferguson 1990). This was expressed in the following (ironic) statement made by a European woman working for an international NGO in Dhaka, discussing the practical difficulties faced by a member of her staff in sending his child domestic worker to school:

‘Reality is so complicated. I am glad we don’t deal in reality. I am glad I don’t know the language. This way it is easy. We have the bad employers and the virtuous poor. We know just a little and so think that it is easy to do something. This is how we can stay involved.’

The need for ‘supplements and extensions’ to build agency for children in the world of development is very clear. For poor children in particular, the world of international development agencies is totally unfamiliar in its textures, colours, norms, language, values, tastes and smells. Children new from the street cannot participate effectively in such an environment. If they are to speak at all, let alone make a real contribution, they need to have time to feel at home, and have the issues explained very carefully so that they understand all the implications of what they are being asked to comment on. This requires considerable long term investment from both the individual and the organisation. This gives a structural bias towards children from middle class or elite families, who have ‘supplements and extensions’ already built in. They are likely to have at least some of the skills and knowledge required, and be immediately more comfortable in the agency environment. With more regular lifestyles and perhaps family transport, middle class children are also more likely to be punctual and regular in attendance, and so perceived as ‘committed’ by the adults involved. Ironically, where the children do come from disadvantaged backgrounds, the overall logic may be even more strongly intensive and exclusive – the costs of starting over with a different child are very high, to recruit ‘new’ participants from the ‘known’ faces’ involves much less effort and less risk. By the same token, of course, the resources which build the children’s agency simultaneously dissociate – or even alienate - the children from their former contexts. The poorer their backgrounds the more pronounced this alienation is likely to be.

Part of the culture of ‘child participation’ is to emphasise the agency of children and downplay the significance of adults. The history of *Amra* calls this into question. For Bangladesh at least it was unique in being an organisation genuinely run for and by children. Nonetheless, the influence of adults has been critical in shaping the form that children’s agency has taken, through the particular kinds of ‘supplements and extensions’ they provide. In the very early years key officers in the organisation that sponsored *Amra* were enthusiasts for environmental issues. *Amra*’s first major attempt at income generation was

accordingly a waste-management programme. The evaluation undertaken in 2000 found that the presence of the adult facilitator was a critical factor in building *Amra*, guiding the group's development, and supporting them through times of trouble, when they could easily have broken apart (White 2002c:35-7). The 'rules' which the boys devised were deeply counter-cultural, a bulwark against the structural violence which underlay the daily violence and poverty in which the children lived. In this they drew, without doubt, on the strong bonds of friendship and solidarity that were present amongst the boys before they formed *Amra*, which many studies attest are common amongst groups of children who live and work in the street (eg Hecht 1998) and which other studies have found to be important factors in building successful NGO collective action groups. But the boys' ability to formalise and sustain these principles significantly reflect the adult facilitator's approach, drawing out of them what issues they saw and how they might best be addressed, through a kind of Socratic questioning. This was, of course, 'facilitation', fostering skills and approaches that it is unlikely the boys could have developed all on their own. But paradoxically it may also have enabled the boys to dig deeper, through the challenges of their daily lives which threatened to fracture and disperse them, to reach an alternative set of values with which they at their truest wished to identify. The adults who assumed the oversight of *Amra* in 2002 did not share these counter-cultural commitments. The agency expressed by the *Amra* children accordingly came increasingly to reflect a more mainstream set of values, consonant with the new forms of 'supplements and extensions' made available to them.

Once children are incorporated into the mainstream model of development its appeal is clear. It offers a heady mix of prestigious encounters, comfortable offices, fancy food, money, travel, status, attention from high status people, and the prospect of future opportunities. For NGO staff similarly it has much to recommend it. Not having to leave the office means efficient use of time and a minimum of discomfort. The work is high exposure, the many meetings satisfy the bureaucratic demand of demonstrable activities, the production of media outputs – videos, publications, dramatic performances etc – gives tangible

outcomes to show, and in a currency which has high value in an advocacy and performance-oriented world. Producing these outputs also offers opportunities to bestow lucrative contracts and bring in friends as consultants from the worlds of performance arts, publishing, or the media. The attractions of such approaches over the hardship, relative invisibility and uncertain outcomes of working at street level are very clear.

These advantages for individuals apply also at the institutional level. If ‘child rights’ defines the field for development agencies working with children, and participation is seen as the key to other rights, then being able to demonstrate children’s participation becomes critical to an agency’s legitimacy. ‘Made by children’ becomes the equivalent of a designer label, adding value to a diverse range of products from project documents to calendars to videos to international statements. This has both material and symbolic value - it shows the credibility of the agency that promotes it and is effective for fundraising. The relatively high financial cost of producing outputs with such high value added means that large funds can be disbursed with relatively low administrative overheads, offering a model of bureaucratic efficiency. The upward and outward trend in the direction of participation is also indicative. Despite the rhetoric of bottom up development and the importance of local responsiveness, in the world of development, the major financial and esteem rewards, both corporate and individual, derive not from the local but from the global ‘community.’ This perhaps explains the element of ‘show’ that we have observed throughout this paper. When it comes to this model of participation at least, it seems that the development industry is not only setting the stage, but also providing the audience.

DETERMINATION OF STRUCTURE?

Tracing the patterns and outcomes of participation for the young people of *Amra* suggests the significance of structure also at a further, deeper level. In development texts the importance of participation is always posed in terms of politics - citizenship, democracy and so on (Eyben 2003). There is little or no discussion of the market, or of capitalism. But the outcomes of this model of participation conform perfectly to the market ideal: commodity and consumption focused; individualist; competitive; and differentiating. Is this a coincidence? Or should it at least raise some doubts about the derivation of this model of participation, and perhaps even 'child rights' as presently understood? This question takes us beyond the remit of this paper, but we believe it needs to be raised. We are familiar with the figure of 'economic man' and the way he shapes academic and policy analysis (eg Douglas and Ney 1998). Does 'economic child', the child as *consumer*, whose 'rights' are required to invigorate new markets, in any way animate the 'social and political child' whom we encounter in development discourse? Or, to put this another way, is it true, as Daniel Cook states in his study of the very different context of the United States children's clothing industry that:

'Children's participation *in the world of goods* as actors, as persons with desire, underpins their current emergent status as rights-bearing individuals.' (12)

(emphasis added)

This paper suggests that the model of 'children's participation' practised in Bangladesh can significantly be explained by the structure of the development industry that promotes it. As stated above, we do not dispute that denial of voice is a major issue for poor children in Bangladesh. Our concern is that the present model of participation may itself entrench this. If *Amra* is imagined as a compass, with the slum and its children as the north pole which provides its primary orientation, then the development agencies

might be envisaged as a powerful magnet, which enters this field of attraction, and tugs the point of the compass increasingly towards itself. *Amra* has existed from the start within the pull of these opposing forces. Since 2002, however, its compass has increasingly pointed towards the magnet as true north. From children organising, the focus has become children participating. As seen above, what they have been participating *in* is mainly agency sponsored events and programmes.

This paper identifies three areas of challenge for the current practice of child participation. First, it points to its vulnerability to class capture and agency co-option, and suggests the need to re-emphasise the priority of survival rights, which affect the most disadvantaged children. Second, it points to its ‘projectisation’, the way participation has *become* a project of development agencies and draws children *into* the projects of development agencies. The logic underlying this is understandable, but it is not inevitable. There could be another model of child participation, which is extensive rather than intensive, inclusive rather than excluding. The movement required is not only spatial, but also conceptual, entailing a genuine shift from the physical and discursive comfort zones of development organisations. This would not do away with the need for any ‘supplements and extensions’ through the discovery of children’s agency in ‘pure’ form. Rather, the third challenge is to seek out and work with the social, cultural, and other forms of resource on which marginalised children already rely. The bonds of solidarity commonly noted amongst groups of street children would be one example of this. Similarly, some development workers who have left the office to work with children living on the street in their own setting, have found them more able to participate actively in programmes than working children who have to negotiate participation with their families (O’Kane, personal communication). More about mobilisation than participation, this would involve going *out* of the offices to where poor children are – the fields, the schools, the factories, the homes – to find ways to support them in their struggles, build on the resources they already deploy, and foster strategic alliances which will help them on their way.

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Endnotes

¹ The views presented in this paper are those of the individual authors, and do not represent any of the organisations for which they now work or have worked previously. We are grateful to Claire O’Kane, Hayat Osseiran-Mandil, Henk Van Beers and James Copestake for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² This is a pseudonym. Amra began as a boy’s organisation but in the past 2-3 years it has opened up to involve girls also. As this occurred after the study on which this paper is based, we are unable to discuss the implications of this development here.

³ We are grateful to the University of Bath and the Shared Scholarship Scheme of DFID for funding this MSc study.

⁴ This involved interviews with thirteen NGOs and sixty street and working children, see White (2002a). We are grateful to ESCOR, the research funding branch of the British Overseas Development Administration (now renamed the Department of International Development, DFID) for funding this.

⁵ We are grateful to the British Academy for funding this research.

⁶ These comprise the core and outer groups of child members, slightly better off children who are classed as ‘volunteers’, ‘beneficiary’ members of street-based groups, and young men who were formerly in the core, who retain a link as graduated members.

⁷ A good point of entry to this (and wider debates around participation) is provided by the Participation Group within the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, UK (<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/Part/index.html>).

⁸ The other elements he identified were: ‘planning’, a set of structures and processes, and ‘policy’, a state’s [or agency’s] development intentions.

⁹ The references Lee uses are: Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press; Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone; and Latour, B. 1987. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

¹⁰ For more discussion of ‘resources’ see eg Salmarshe, D. 2002. ‘The resource profile approach: A Kosovo Case Study.’ *Public Administration and Development* 22(2) 179-190; and White, S. and Ellison, M. 2007. ‘Wellbeing, livelihoods and resources in social practice.’ in I R Gough and J.A.McGregor (ed). *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: New Approaches and Research Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ While ‘the field’ Strandell talks about here is the research arena, the term also clearly evokes Bourdieu’s work on habitus which also has some important affinities with Lee’s arguments described above.

¹² As in many other societies, female chastity and family honour are closely linked in Bangladesh. Gossip that a girl was even seen talking to a boy can be very damaging for her reputation. It may be, however, that even outside of the NGOs these patterns are easing within towns, where young couples can now be seen sitting and talking in parks and so on. Alfini (2004) discusses related issues regarding cross-sex interaction between young men and women at international ‘child rights’ events.

¹³ In this case the ‘minority’ – the poor – is in fact the majority. However, in terms of social visibility and voice, it remains in minority status.

¹⁴ As this paper shows, over time the organisation has undergone substantial change. This of course continues. This paper is based on two main phases of fieldwork, one in late 2000 and one in late 2004. The discussion of *Amra* presented here should not, therefore, be taken as an accurate picture of the organisation since 2005.

¹⁵ A public park and monument which is a popular location for cultural displays of various kinds.

¹⁶ Even so, *Amra* members are generally claiming travel expenses at a considerably lower rate than the middle class adolescents who also participate.

¹⁷ After many attempts by *Amra* to generate income through various enterprises, the agency that supports them decided to give core members of *Amra* a stipend, to enable them to concentrate on their development work.